

Remembering Peterloo

by John Gardner

Amritsar (1919). Kent State (1970). Sharpeville (1960). Soweto (1976). Tiananmen Square (1989). The list of massacres of peaceful protesters by their own governing forces is lengthy and would obliterate the word limit of this issue if all could possibly be named. But when citizens are again killed by authorities, Peterloo is often invoked and remembered. That massacre, in Manchester on 16 August 1819, saw fifteen people mortally wounded on the day and over 650 injured. What started out as a peaceful gathering with a carnival atmosphere, ended up becoming, as Robert Poole states, "the bloodiest political event of the nineteenth century on English soil."

Many more have been killed in other massacres, yet Peterloo remains significant in the public consciousness when others are forgotten. Approaching the bicentenary of the event there will be papers, conferences and commemorations around the world. This article considers why this event, which is not taught regularly at schools or universities, and has no monument, has been remembered, continuing to serve as a touchstone for subsequent killings of citizens who protest.

The facts—the names and dates—are generally agreed on. Unarmed people from the Lancashire region, consisting of men, women and children marched to St. Peter's Field in Manchester carrying banners protesting that one of the biggest cities in Britain had no elected representative in Parliament. Among slogans on the banners were "Annual Parliaments", "The Poor the Source of all Government", "Labour is the Source of All Wealth" and "No Taxation Without Equal Representation". A number of women reformers dressed in white surrounded the hustings that were occupied by the organisers, headed by Henry "Orator" Hunt, who was to address the crowd. Surrounding them were 1,500 troops, 1,000 of whom were regular soldiers.

The authorities, headed by clerical magistrates, the Reverend Charles Ethelston and the Reverend William Robert Hay, the self-termed "Committee of Public Safety", gathered at a Mr. Buxton's house, which overlooked St Peter's Field. They then waited until 1.35 pm. when the crowd had grown to around 60-80,000 before Ethelston reputedly read the Riot Act from a window, leaning out so far that Hay allegedly held his coat. Many said that it was never read. The Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, which consisted of well-off young men who had bought their own uniforms, then attempted to get to the hustings to arrest the organisers, but soon got into trouble as they tried to hack their way through the compacting crowd. The real soldiers, the 15th Hussars, some of whom were wearing their Waterloo medals, then followed.

Only twenty-five minutes after the Riot Act was reported to have been read, the field had been cleared, except for the casualties. In the surrounding streets those escaping were pursued and attacked in the hours that followed. The Prince Regent, later George IV, congratulated the yeomanry on their actions that day, and the poet laureate Robert Southey's first response was to organise a petition supporting those he believed had put down a 'rascally rabble'. The name 'Peter-loo' was coined, firstly in *The Manchester Observer*, apparently because the Hussars were wearing their Waterloo medals. Another explanation is that a special constable entered the house of an Ann Jones, who was helping the wounded, and shouted "This is Waterloo for you – this is Waterloo!"



George Cruikshank, 'The Clerical Magistrate', *The Political House that Jack Built* (1819)

The backdrop of this bloody event included economic decline and political repression. The period from 1815 to 1821, saw reformers and radicals fighting through strikes and protests to gain access to representation in unreformed Britain, where under 5% of the male population had the right to vote. After the battle of Waterloo, a post-war slump set in that was worsened with poor harvests—the explosion of Mount Tambora in Indonesia caused the famous "year without a summer". With around 200 000 combatants returning from the war to unemployment, Britain was in the depths of a depression. The period from 1819 to 1820 marks the high point of repression in Britain during the nineteenth century. In the months after Peterloo, "Six Acts" were passed that affected freedoms and trebled the price of newspapers. "Rebellions" followed, at least one of which was fomented by a government spy system that aimed to draw out radical reformers. These apparent risings, involving a very small number of people,

led to eight men being publically hanged and beheaded for High Treason in front of crowds of up to 100 000 people at Glasgow, London and Stirling, between May and September 1820. It was another ninety-six years, until the Easter Rising in 1916, before anyone was executed for High Treason again.

In the immediate aftermath of Peterloo there was a battle to control and set the narrative of the event in the minds of the public. All events are ephemeral and different versions of how they should be remembered battle for domination in the public sphere. Narratives of Peterloo took many forms including: a public trial of the organisers, an inquest into a death, newspaper articles, published accounts and, perhaps most powerfully, poetry and illustrations that could transmit messages to even the illiterate. At the time of writing there have been found, in various archives, over three hundred eye-witness accounts by 266 people who witnessed the march to St. Peter's Field and the massacre. The *London Times* had a reporter, John Tyas, on

the platform with the organisers, and his accounts sided with the people who were massacred. Probably the most widely read version of events is Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1838). Bamford had been on the hustings with Hunt and has been hugely influential in shaping perceptions of the massacre:

The cavalry were in confusion: they evidently could not, with all the weight of man and horse, penetrate that compact mass of human beings; and their sabres were plied to hew a way through naked held-up hands, and defenceless heads; and then chopped limbs, and wound-gaping skulls were seen, and groans and cries were mingled with the din of that horrid confusion. "Ah! Ah!" "for shame! for shame!" was shouted.

The trial of the organisers led to Bamford, Hunt and three others being imprisoned. An inquest for John Lees, a Waterloo veteran who had been stabbed and suffered a lingering death, exposed some of the barbarity of the massacre. Lees is reported as saying that "at Waterloo there was man to man, but there it was down-right murder".

Many accounts in prose and poetry, such as Percy Shelley's "Mask of Anarchy", depict women being murdered at Peterloo. Sherwin's *Weekly Register* asserted: "Women appear to have been the particular objects of the fury of the Cavalry Assassins. One woman [...] was sabred over the head [...] some were sabred in the breast; so inhuman, indiscriminate, and fiend-like, was the conduct of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry." Figures compiled by M. L. Bush in *The Casualties of Peterloo* seem to bear this out. A two-year-old child there with his mother was the first victim on the day. Although comprising only an eighth of the number at Peterloo, more than a quarter of all casualties were women. Four of the fifteen killed on the day were women and indeed illustrations, poems and articles all emphasise women being particularly targeted. Most accounts by sympathisers of the protesters seem to exonerate the regular soldiers and damn the yeomanry.

The established church is also remembered badly by this event. The clerical magistrates Hay and Ethelstone became the subject of articles, squibs, poetry and devastating cartoons such as George Cruikshank's "The Clerical Magistrate". This illustration from *The Political House that Jack Built* shows the incompatible position of churchmen acting as judges. On the left Ethelston holds a cross and preaches above the Christogram "IHS". Facing the right he holds a gibbet, shackles and a flail as he "Commits starving vagrants" above a crown with the initials GPR—George Prince Regent.

The continued remembrance of Peterloo, without a monument, an educational curriculum, or living memory, serves as a warning that, even in periods of the severest repression, state-sanctioned violence is not forgotten. Peterloo is a Mancunian wound that, through multi-media exposure, became visible all over the world, as the art it inspired found new audiences. The people and institutions responsible for the massacre are remembered with ignominy. Out of all of the memorials though I think that the poetry and cartoons have survived best. The compression of anger in Shelley's poem "England in 1819" where he sides with a "people starved and stabbed on the untilld field" has survived. George Cruikshank's still rousing illustrations of Peterloo such as



STEEL LOZENGES

will stop their pain,
And set the Constitution
right again.

George Cruikshank. 'Steel Lozenges'. *The Man in the Moon*. London: William Hone, 1819.

"Manchester Heroes", "Peterloo Memorial" and "Steel Lozenges", devastatingly mock and mangle the guilty with a sardonic, lacerating humour that can produce a laugh and sickness at the same time. Writing in *Past and Present* Thomas Carlyle stated that Peterloo had left a "treasury of rage" behind "ever since". The historian G. M. Trevelyan's last words were reportedly, "Peterloo 1819".



John Gardner is a Professor of English Literature at the Department of English and Media, Anglia Ruskin University. His main areas of research are in 18th- and 19th-century literature and culture, and he is the author of *Poetry and Popular Protest; Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (2011).